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The Collapsing CSTO

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The Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, long a source of pride for Russia, is falling apart at the seams.

Two weeks ago, Uzbekistan gave notice to CSTO headquarters in Moscow that it has withdrawn from the military and security bloc. This is part of a larger trend that threatens to destroy the organization. After Tashkent's announcement, Tajikistan said it would hike the annual rent for the base Moscow leases in the country to $230 million, about a tenfold increase. A few days later, Kyrgyzstan, following Tajikistan, announced that it would raise its rent on Russian bases there.

Regarding Uzbekistan's withdrawal from the CSTO, Uzbek President Islam Karimov has used this trick before. In 1999, he withdrew from the organization, hoping to thereby win concessions from the United States and other Western countries. Uzbekistan then offered the United States the use of Karshi-Khanabad as a military base in 2001. But the romance with the West ended abruptly in 2005, when Uzbek forces killed several hundred protesters in Andijan. As much as NATO needed its base in Uzbekistan, the West could not leave the atrocity unpunished, and the international community placed Tashkent on its unofficial

blacklist.

The Western isolation of Uzbekistan gave Vladimir Putin a golden opportunity to bring Tashkent back into Moscow's orbit. Russian officials towed Karimov's line by saying no massacre had taken place in Andijan, despite clear evidence to the contrary. In fact, they claimed, Uzbek authorities had foiled an insidious plot by international terrorists and had liquidated its operatives. Karimov thanked Moscow for its loyalty by annulling its rental agreement with Washington on the use of its military base and returning to the embrace of the CSTO.

But after a few years, everyone had forgotten about the Andijan massacre. Moreover, Karimov realized that when the international coalition forces withdraw from Afghanistan in 2014, that will leave Uzbekistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan, open to Taliban infiltration.

Within months of the departure of Western forces from Afghanistan, aggressive Islam will undoubtedly surge into Central Asia, inevitably leading to civil war there. The majority of the people in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan live in abject poverty, making those countries especially vulnerable. It is very likely that this factor, more than anything else, caused Uzbekistan, and then Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, to shift away from Russia and toward the United States.

In fact, the CSTO has been preparing for major civil unrest after the U.S. departure from Afghanistan for several years. Russia has tried to create a collective rapid-reaction force and is contributing substantial resources to the project. But Karimov has been adamantly opposed to this idea from the outset. He demonstratively skipped the latest CSTO summit and refused to sign the final documents issued by the member states.

Karimov, a skilled former Soviet functionary, surely has not forgotten the unstable situation in the late 1980s. Then, the Soviet army was much larger and the officers and soldiers more disciplined, but every attempt to deploy Soviet forces to resolve internal conflicts in the republics ended in bloodshed and even more civil unrest. It seems that the leaders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan do not see the Russian army as a panacea for their problems. On the contrary, they probably think it will make matters worse for them.

In anticipation of its upcoming withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington has decided to switch from using sticks to carrots in Central Asia. The move is logical and pragmatic. Although Karimov and other Central Asian rulers of his ilk are dictators, the security of the U.S. forces that remain behind in Afghanistan after 2014 is a much higher priority. They urgently need to establish bases providing rapid deployment and logistical support in relatively safe areas. To that end, the United States negotiating with all of the Central Asian states to expand military cooperation. According to reports in both the U.S. and regional media, Washington is offering to donate some of the military equipment it pulls out of Afghanistan to cooperative Central Asian states.

Not surprisingly, Moscow strongly opposes the continued presence of existing U.S. military bases in the region and the appearance of any new ones. At the CSTO summit in December, Russia pressured participants into adopting a resolution stipulating that military bases from non-CSTO countries could be permitted in the region only by a joint decision of CSTO member states, effectively giving Moscow veto power over new U.S. bases in the region.

Recently, a senior Russian official explained Moscow's position frankly: "If the price to be paid for stability in Central Asia is the appearance of U.S. bases in the region," he said, "then such a price is not acceptable for us."

This stubborn position, however, could result in civil war in the region. Although Moscow may be indifferent to civil war in Central Asia, the region's leaders are not. Thus, it is no surprise that Karimov has distanced himself from the CSTO, an organization that had been slowly weakening for years. The CSTO, created to ensure the security of the member states in the region, began tottering at the first sign of a potential threat to its members. This is because the CSTO from the beginning did not emerge out of a real need to confront a collective security threat, but as a result of Moscow's desire to knock together a military alliance that would somewhat resemble the long-defunct Warsaw Pact and that would also serve as a "competitor" to NATO.

In reality, the CSTO is not so much a multilateral alliance as it is a collection of bilateral agreements between Moscow and the respective member states. In return for a weak semblance of security guarantees, Moscow required the semblance of loyalty and demanded that its fellow members declare a policy of noncooperation with the West. But Russia simply lacks the resources and authority to guarantee the safety of other CSTO members, much less their economic prosperity. Thus, it is no surprise that Moscow's CSTO allies will always side with whichever country makes them the best offer.

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